



Research Article

# When and why we forget to buy ☆

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## Abstract

We examine consumers' forgetting to buy items they intended to buy. We show that the propensity to forget depends on the types of items consumers intend to purchase and the way consumers shop. Consumers may shop using a memory-based search by recalling their planned purchases from memory and directly searching for the products. For example, consumers may use the search function at an online store. Alternatively, consumers may use a stimulus-based search by systematically moving through a store, visually scanning the inventory and selecting the required items as they are encountered. Using an online shopping paradigm, we show that consumers are more likely to forget the items they infrequently buy when using the memory-based search, but not when using the stimulus-based search. In fact, when using the stimulus-based search, consumers are sometimes even better able to remember the items they infrequently (vs. frequently) buy. Moreover, consumers fail to take these factors into account when predicting their memory. As a result, they do not take appropriate actions to prevent forgetting (e.g., using a shopping list).

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## Introduction

Forgetting to buy is both common and annoying. As consumers, we have all forgotten to buy an ingredient necessary for a meal or an item our significant other asked us to purchase just minutes before we entered the grocery store. For consumers, the consequences of forgetting include having to return to the

store or to re-organize meal plans. For companies, consumer forgetting results in missed sales. Forgetting to buy is a problem for both routine purchases, such as forgetting to buy milk when it is needed for breakfast, and for less routine occasions, such as forgetting to buy asparagus when it is needed for a special meal.

Grocery shopping, either in brick and mortar or online stores, represents one of the largest household expenditures (Food Marketing Institute, 2012). Despite its importance, no research has investigated factors that cause consumer forgetting while shopping. Descriptive and correlational results indicate that forgetting is common, and can be substantially reduced by the simple use of shopping lists (Block & Morwitz, 1999; Hui, Inman, Huang, & Suher, 2013). We address this gap by looking at when and why shoppers forget to buy. We argue that people are not equally likely to forget to buy in all situations or for all products. We distinguish between two different shopping strategies and assess how the type of search in each shopping strategy impacts the likelihood of forgetting items that are

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either high or low in purchase frequency, such as milk and asparagus in the examples above.

In order to understand consumer forgetting, we need to consider consumers' predictions of their memory performance. If consumers can accurately predict forgetting they can make informed decisions about what, if any, preventative measures should be employed to reduce the likelihood of forgetting (e.g., write a shopping list or use the best search strategy depending on the type of items they need). Therefore, we investigate whether consumers' memory predictions accurately reflect memory performance and, in particular, the influence of search strategy and frequency of purchase of items on actual memory.

Below, we present our hypotheses of how shopping strategy and the frequency of item purchase may affect forgetting. Similar to the distinction concerning choices (Lynch & Srull, 1982), we distinguish between a stimulus-based search strategy, where consumers systematically scan items in the store to find the products they need, and a memory-based search strategy in which consumers try to recall items from memory to guide search directly to the item's location. Across a series of studies, we find that search strategy interacts with frequency of item purchase, such that items that are infrequently purchased are forgotten more often than items that are frequently purchased when consumers are using the memory-based search strategy. This effect for item type is not observed when using the stimulus-based search strategy. Importantly, consumers do not anticipate the shopping strategy by purchase frequency interaction in their memory predictions.

## Theoretical background

### *Grocery shopping: a challenge for memory*

Consumers have difficulty remembering previously identified grocery needs (Bettman, 1979). In fact, on average consumers fail to buy about 30% of items they intended to buy (Hui, Huang, Suher, & Inman, 2013). For example, during the 2010 Christmas season, 44% of consumers forgot to buy thank you notes, 37% forgot to buy holiday cards or letters, 36% forgot to buy batteries (for Christmas gifts), and 25% forgot to buy wrapping paper (New York Times, 2011). These unfulfilled purchases occur less often when a memory aid, such as a shopping list, is used (Block & Morwitz, 1999). However, many shoppers do not use shopping lists. Descriptive studies from several countries show that only about half of shoppers use lists (Thomas & Garland, 2004).

In sum, research in consumer behavior shows that memory while shopping is highly fallible (Bettman, 1979) and that shoppers need a shopping list to remember (Block & Morwitz, 1999). However, many shoppers do not use a shopping list to remember what they need to buy. Thus, forgetting is a problem for shoppers. In the next section, we build the hypotheses about when and why forgetting to buy is most common.

### *Two ways of shopping: memory-based and stimulus-based search*

Consumers may choose to shop for groceries by recalling their planned purchases from memory, locating the recalled products, and putting them in their shopping cart. Consider a

shopper using this strategy when shopping for cheddar cheese. In the store, the consumer would first try to recall the items s/he was planning to buy, hopefully retrieving cheddar cheese. S/he would then go to the Dairy Products section and pick up the cheese. We call this memory-based search. Alternatively, shoppers may choose to methodically move through each of the sections of the store visually scanning the items to ensure all of the required products are selected (e.g., browsing all product categories in an online store or walking up and down the aisles in a brick and mortar store). In this case, a shopper may see the cheddar cheese while moving through the Dairy section, and realize that it is needed. We call this a stimulus-based search. Thus, shoppers may retrieve a needed item from memory and go straight to the item location or browse through the categories in search of the products they need.

Previous research has made a distinction between memory-based and stimulus-based choices (Lynch & Srull, 1982; Rottenstreich, Sood, & Brenner, 2007; Sanbonmatsu & Fazio, 1990). In memory-based choices, consumers make a choice by recalling the options, whereas in stimulus-based choices, consumers make a choice while being exposed to the options. These two different approaches to choice influence what options are considered and chosen. We posit that the distinction between memory-based and stimulus-based can be extended to how consumers search for a planned purchase. That is, after consumers have decided to purchase an item, the strategy consumers use to search for the items they need (i.e., memory-based vs. stimulus-based search) can influence whether they end up buying that item.

It is important to highlight that the memory-based versus stimulus-based distinction for search strategies is not an absolute distinction but more a matter of degree. For example, even though the stimulus-based search strategy relies more on stimulus information than on memory, one has to match the products one is scanning with memory about whether the product is needed. Similarly, in many situations in which search is predominantly memory-based, consumers may still rely quite heavily on stimulus-based visual information to physically locate products after retrieving a to-be-bought product from memory.

Although prior research has not addressed these search strategies per se, studies documenting consumers' paths through stores provide support for their existence (Hui, Bradlow, & Fader, 2009; Hui, Huang, et al., 2013; Hui, Inman, et al., 2013). Prior research also suggests that although both strategies (and a mix of the two strategies) are common, the majority of consumers do not use a pure stimulus-based strategy (Bell, Corsten, & Knox, 2011; Hui et al., 2009; Hui, Huang, et al., 2013; Hui, Inman, et al., 2013; Inman, Winer, & Ferraro, 2009; Stilley, Inman, & Wakefield, 2010) despite the fact that walking the aisles helps memory (Gilbride, Inman, & Stilley, 2015; Hui, Huang, et al., 2013) as in-store shelf facings benefit memory, consideration, and choice (Chandon, Hutchinson, Bradlow, & Young, 2009). In addition, walking the aisles is often stimulated by retailers working hard to motivate shoppers to browse their assortment. Examples include scattering products that are regularly bought (e.g., milk, eggs) around the store (Granbois, 1968; Iyer, 1989), forcing customers to walk the entire store (e.g., Ikea, Hollister),

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